

POLITICS

Struggle and Hope of Europe's Progressive Parties

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Progressive parties in the EU have been experiencing an up-hill struggle as voters are increasingly won over by the pessimistic narratives of right-wing populists. Hendrik Vos and Jordy Dehaene examine the difficulties experienced by the Left in Europe in recent years, the transformed voter in globalised times, and how progressives can move forward with a message of hope.

In January 2017, Alexander Van der Bellen was sworn in as president of Austria. Although he officially stood as an independent candidate, he was supported by the Green party within which he had been militantly active for more than 20 years. He won the presidential election against Norbert Hofer, the far-right candidate. In fact, he won twice: the elections were repeated after irregularities came to light. A sigh of relief swept through large parts of the European Union following this election result. After all, 2016 was the year of the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump as US president. People feared for the future of the European Union: would populist parties with strong nationalist positions get their say in various Member States?

Although Green candidates like Van der Bellen criticised the course of the EU, they did not question the added value of cooperation. In 2017, the dreaded breakthrough of right-wing populist parties did not take on the proportions that had been feared a few months earlier. In France, Emmanuel Macron became president with a strong pro-European programme; in Germany, Angela Merkel began another new term. Extreme right and populist parties seemed to secure strong wins in the Italian elections in 2018, although the precise classification of a movement like Five Stars is difficult. Election analyses are currently focused mainly on nationalist and populist groups. But what about the balance of power elsewhere? What are the positions of progressive parties in Europe today, and to what extent are these parties able to influence decision making? [1]

Progressive parties' struggle for survival

The last European Parliament elections took place in 2014, a period during which several Member States were confronted with a drastic austerity policy. This was the result of the euro crisis that had

dominated the agenda since 2009. In this context, progressive parties won to a limited extent. The Greens were stagnant, but the far left made gains. Since that time both groups have remained about the same size, with just over 50 members. The Social Democrats, with 188 seats, are still the second largest group and they have narrowed the gap with the largest group, the centre-right European People's Party.

However, the cautious progress of the progressive parties has not become a trend. On the contrary, the victory of Van der Bellen in Austria was a rare exception. This becomes apparent when we look at more recent elections in the various Member States.

The Social Democrats in the Netherlands and France were more or less wiped out in 2017. The British Labour Party made strides with Jeremy Corbyn, but that probably had more to do with the weakness of Prime Minister Theresa May than with widely supported enthusiasm for his project. The local elections of 2018 were disillusioning. And in Italy, the Social Democrats lost no less than 180 seats in the Chamber in early 2018.

The position of the far left is striking in some countries: in France it did not much matter whether or not Jean-Luc Mélenchon made it to the second round of the presidential elections. But in comparison with the far right, radical left-wing parties only rarely achieve spectacular results.

Green parties have also failed to make significant breakthroughs. The outcome of the most recent elections in Luxembourg was not too bad, with a result of over 10 per cent of the vote. This enabled government participation, as it did in Sweden where the party gained only 7 per cent. On paper, the Greens also do well in Latvia and Lithuania, although these are rather conservative parties. In the Netherlands, the hefty gains that Groenlinks booked with Jesse Klaver received a lot of attention, but the party still only holds (slightly) below 10 per cent. After the last German elections, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen seemed to be en route to government participation after a 8.9 per cent boost, but the gap with the other parties was ultimately too large. In the majority of Member States, the green parties are stagnating or in slight decline. Only rarely do they convince more than 8 per cent of the voters.

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Meanwhile, if we look at the level of heads of state and government within the EU, we see that only four of the 28 leaders have a social democratic tendency. A few years ago, the ratio was almost one in three. So it is going downhill.

There is also Alexis Tsipras, the Greek prime minister, whose party belongs to the leftmost group in the European Parliament. He was elected with a programme that pledged to forgo the heavy cuts that his country was supposed to undertake. When Tsipras won with his Syriza party in Greece, the left dreamt that a radical wave would flood Europe. Spain, with Podemos, would be the next to follow. Not much has come of any of this. And it is still very questionable whether Tsipras will ever get a new mandate from the Greek electorate, if only because he was unable to execute even a fraction of his programme.

Looking at the overall picture, we can ascertain that progressive parties have a hard time surviving. Although there are exceptions, Social Democrats are mostly pummeled in the corner. Greens barely make progress, and the extreme left seldom prevails over the extreme right.

Eurobarometer regularly assesses the themes that occupy voters in Europe. A survey conducted in the autumn of 2017 shows that migration and terrorism are the two main concerns for Europeans. Conservative and outspoken right-wing parties indeed wage strong campaigns around these issues. Of course, progressive parties also address these topics in their programmes, putting forward completely different solutions. Yet the political opponents prevail.

Migration and terrorism are not, however, the only dominant themes. Topics that are traditionally strongly associated with progressive parties also surface in the top ten: climate change and unemployment have long been important concerns for large groups in the EU. European voters are also concerned about pensions and environmental quality in general. But Social Democrats and Greens are apparently less successful at cashing in on these concerns with the electorate.

The transformed voter

Why is it that progressive parties often fail to attract voters with their programmes? Part of the explanation may lie with the voter, who has changed in recent decades. In short, the vast majority of people have benefitted materially over the past period, and this poses a major challenge for progressive parties.

In the past, classical left-wing parties argued particularly for material progress: higher wages, better working conditions, decent housing, and health care for everyone. Large sections of the population reaped the benefits, and in a number of respects Europe is in better shape than it was a few decades ago. People are healthier and better educated, they live in better homes that have bathrooms and heating, they eat and consume more, they enjoy great levels of comfort, and treatments for diseases are more successful... Significant segments of the population have achieved levels of prosperity that the previous generation could only dream of.

Yet there remains a certain underclass that knows deep misery. For example, people of immigrant origin who for various reasons find it difficult to make their way in the labour market and in society in general. There are single, unemployed mothers, and retirees with ridiculously low pensions. Groups that are considerably more at risk than others emerge in various research. But these groups are poorly organised, and partly for this reason lack the critical mass to grow into movements like the classic left parties and unions of the past.

Losers in globalisation

Much of the increased prosperity is a consequence of globalisation, which facilitates quicker and smoother trade, travel, information exchange, and so forth. However, not everyone is able to harvest the fruits of globalisation at the same time and to the same extent. Large companies that operate seamlessly across borders benefit more from a large single market and free trade than do smaller players. Those who are highly skilled and speak a few languages more easily find their way in the

globalised society than those with less schooling and multilinguality. It is in this context that people speak of the victims of globalisation. It is true that there are victims: the small company that has to close its doors, and the employee who is out-competed by someone from across the border willing to do the same job in worse conditions and for lower wages.

“ The most interesting strategy for progressive forces is one that consistently offers hope ”

But much broader than the actual victims, whose number is difficult to quantify and who also may have access to safety nets, is the group of people who feel that others benefit more than they do from globalisation. For even if everyone profits, dissatisfaction arises when there is a sense that the benefits are not fairly distributed. The malcontent that is manifested in large parts of the population may have to do with these aspects rather than with real material shortcomings. This phenomenon, combined with the feeling that there are processes that cannot be grasped, is very important in understanding the disappointment, discontent, and lack of satisfaction experienced by many groups today.

This poses a challenge for left-wing parties: translating their concern for those who are underprivileged or left behind into catchy slogans and an election programme has become more complex. For example, a plea for tax increases will not necessarily be eagerly received by potential progressive voters, whereas in the past this was an easy point to score with the left-wing constituency. Whereas that constituency previously had no problem with such a tax increase, today they also earn well, save for their pensions, and may have laid away some money in an investment fund.

Was everything better in the past?

Nowadays we see that parties that can be labelled as right-wing populists are able to reach these voters. An important element in this trend, according to Marc Elchardus, is a feeling of declinism. Those who feel that everything is going downhill will quickly be inclined to opt for right-wing populist parties. After all, these people generally have a very pessimistic view of society: in the past everything was better, and we are currently on the wrong path. Even if this is not factually true, it does correlate with an actual existing sentiment.

Taking this perspective into account, it is important that progressive parties do not take the same route. Anyone who emphasises that we are on the wrong path implicitly says that things used to be better. This only strengthens the base of parties profiling themselves as guardians of the old traditions and proponents of returning to the past.

It might be wiser for progressive parties to tell a story of hope: it is not so bad in the world, but it could be much better. And the opportunities offered by globalisation can mean so much more for the large swathes of the population that are now insufficiently reaping the benefits.

A message of hope

In France, Emmanuel Macron opposed nationalist politics and espoused European cooperation. Central to his election campaign was the plea for a 'Europe that protects'. This could have come out of the programme of a progressive party, yet the centrist candidate Macron won with this slogan. He presented himself as the candidate of hope, apparently more convincingly than the candidates from more traditional Social Democratic or Green parties.

Progressive parties in the EU are likely currently playing below their weight class; they have more electoral potential than suggested by their current scores. As a result, potential voters are being hijacked by right-wing populist parties and by clever politicians from other denominations.

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The most interesting strategy for progressive forces is one that consistently offers hope. In this way, they can convincingly distinguish themselves from right-wing populists. This means that the impression that we as a society are on a downward-leading path must be avoided. After all, if this becomes the social consensus, conservative and reactionary forces will simply complete the reasoning: if it used to be better, let us return to where we came from. This pessimistic, dark, and somewhat sour and wry worldview is at odds with the progressive programme.

The themes that are of greatest concern to Europeans today offer many starting points for an enthusiastic programme, and allow us to fully build on the DNA of various progressive movements: respect for human dignity, honesty and integrity, concern for those less privileged, solidarity, a plea for real equal opportunities, and ending the reproduction of inequality.

In concrete terms, if the focus is the refugee problem, large-scale tax avoidance, a deeper approach to combatting terrorism, racism, social dumping, climate change, traffic safety or discrimination in education, then it is always possible to work out a programme that the progressive DNA can translate into policy proposals. Some parties put the brakes on the tendency to appeal to all voters. This was evident, for example, in the difficult interaction of some Social Democrats with the refugee issue. That was unfair: after all, it is impossible to convince all voters. But with a motivating, hopeful, and consistent programme, more voters can be won over than is the case today. And more voters will increase the progressive political weight, and consequently the ability to make the world a better place.

[1] Our definition of progressive parties includes political leftist movements, for example Green parties, Social Democrats, and more radical tendencies on that side of the spectrum.